

## Beyond flight and rescue: the migration setting of German Jewry before 1938

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David Jünger

**Beyond Flight and Rescue:  
The Migration Setting of German Jewry before 1938**

The year 1938 marked a turning point in the political course of Nazi Germany: Until then, German Jews had been humiliated, deprived of their rights as German citizens, and driven into poverty. But immediately after the annexation of Austria in March 1938, the Nazi regime began to expel Austrian Jews and, a few months later, during the *Polenaktion*, about 20,000 Jews of Eastern European origin from the so-called *Altreich*. Those who were left on German territory, fled after the November pogroms. The politics of disenfranchisement had been replaced by a politics of expulsion, enforced against a community of people who, for their part, had nowhere left to go.<sup>1</sup> The world had closed its doors for those Jews desperately trying to escape the grip of Nazi German persecution.<sup>2</sup>

Looking back at this year and the desperate plight of the German and Austrian Jews, scholars as well as the public have raised many pressing and haunting questions: Why had the German Jews not escaped when it was still possible? Why stood the world idly by when a whole group of close to a million human beings were under the attack of a racist, murderous regime? And consequently: How many more could have been saved if the German

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Longerich, *Holocaust. The Nazi Persecution and Murder of the Jews*, Oxford/New York 2010, 95–130.

<sup>2</sup> For the Nazi policies towards the Jews, see Uwe Dietrich Adam, *Judenpolitik im Dritten Reich*, Düsseldorf 1972; Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, vol. 1: *The Years of Persecution, 1933–1939*, New York 1997; *ibid.*, vol. 2: *The Years of Extermination, 1939–1945*, New York 2007; Longerich, *Holocaust*; Susanne Heim, “Deutschland muß ihnen ein Land ohne Zukunft sein.” Die Zwangsemigration der Juden 1933 bis 1938, in: Christoph Dieckmann (ed.), *Arbeitsmigration und Flucht. Vertreibung und Arbeitskräfte regulierung im Zwischenkriegseuropa*, Göttingen 1993, 48–81. For the developments of 1938, see Dan Diner, *Die Katastrophe vor der Katastrophe. Auswanderung ohne Einwanderung*, in: *idem/Dirk Blasius (eds.), Zerbrochene Geschichte. Leben und Selbstverständnis der Juden in Deutschland*, Frankfurt a. M. 1991, 138–160; Joseph Tenenbaum, *The Crucial Year 1938*, in: *Yad Vashem Studies* 2 (1958), 49–77; Raphael Gross, *November 1938. Die Katastrophe vor der Katastrophe*, Munich 2013.

Jews, global Jewish organizations and the international community had acted at an appropriate pace and in a determined manner?<sup>3</sup>

Those questions arise because we know what happened after 1938; because we know that Nazi Germany's politics of expulsion was just another step towards their politics of ghettoization and finally: extermination. The monstrosity and tragedy of the Holocaust seem to lead inevitably to those fundamental questions: What could have been done and what has been missed? Whilst those questions are absolutely justified for the actual time the mass murder occurred, they are misleading if transplanted into the preceding years of the 1930s, as they assess persons and institutions at the time as if they knew what those developments were leading up to, or as if they reacted to the process that would later be understood as the Holocaust.

While some contemporary publications about the Jewish situation in Germany and East Central Europe refer to certain events and developments of the 1930s as precursors of the Holocaust by book title alone,<sup>4</sup> others make that connection more explicit, such as Joseph Marcus' book *Social and Political History of the Jews in Poland*. When discussing, for instance the emigration of Polish Jews before the German conquest, he writes:

“Of course, all Jews could not have left Poland, for even the time was far too short, but a substantially larger proportion might have escaped annihilation had the climate of Jewish political opinion and the general attitudes of Jewish

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<sup>3</sup> Until today, there have been innumerable studies addressing these questions, including, most notably: David Wyman, *Paper Walls. America and the Refugee Crisis 1938–1941*, Amherst, Mass. 1968; idem, *The Abandonment of the Jews. America and the Holocaust, 1941–1945*, New York 1984; Rafael Medoff, *The Deafening Silence. American Jewish Leaders and the Holocaust*, New York 1987; Monty Noam Penkower, *The Jews Were Expendable. Free World Diplomacy and the Holocaust*, Detroit 1988; Shabtai Beit Zvi, *Post-Ugandan Zionism on Trial. A Study of the Factors that Caused the Mistakes Made by the Zionist Movement during the Holocaust*, 2 vols., Tel Aviv 1991. The most recent and concise critique of those approaches offers Yehuda Bauer, *Holocaust Rescue Revisited*, in: *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* 7 (2013), no. 3., 127–142. A more comprehensive critique is presented by Henry L. Feingold, *Bearing Witness. How America and Its Jews Responded to the Holocaust*, Syracuse, NY, 1995.

<sup>4</sup> These include, for instance: Katharina Stengel (ed.), *Vor der Vernichtung. Die staatliche Enteignung der Juden im Nationalsozialismus*, Frankfurt a. M. 2007; Hagit Lavsky, *Before Catastrophe. The Distinctive Path of German Zionism*, Jerusalem 1996; Jerzy Tomaszewski, *Auftakt zur Vernichtung. Die Vertreibung polnischer Juden aus Deutschland im Jahre 1938*, Osnabrück 2002; Celia S. Heller, *On the Edge of Destruction. Jews of Poland between the Two World Wars*, New York 1977.

leaders been different from what they were. [...] One cannot avoid the thought that, if emigration had been tackled with the necessary resolution by a united effort of Jewish leaders and organisations in the West and in the affected countries of the East, many thousands of Jews would have survived the war.”<sup>5</sup>

This argument implies that the Jewish organizations of Poland and the Western hemisphere could have known that Poland would be invaded in the following years, and all its Jews murdered by the Germans. A similar line of argument can be found in other works about the German situation before the November pogroms of 1938, such as in Günther Schubert’s book on the 1933 Haavara agreement between the Jewish Agency for Palestine and the Reich Ministry of Economics: This agreement, he writes, provided thousands of Jews with “an opportunity [...] to leave Germany before they were swept away by the wave of destruction.”<sup>6</sup>

As critical as these questions of flight and rescue might seem in retrospect, they are still driven by the benefit of historical hindsight and therefore anachronistic. The years before 1938 were undoubtedly dire times for European Jews. But contemporaries could hardly have foreseen that Germany’s anti-Jewish policies would escalate in mass expulsion and genocide, considering the complex historical setting that informed all considerations on Jewish migration in this period: the demise of liberalism and the upsurge of ethno-nationalism; the rise of authoritarian regimes in many European countries; the economic crisis and related shortage of financial means for emigration assistance; the tightening of national immigration regulations on a global scale; the sluggish progress in building up Jewish Palestine; the deterioration of the Jewish legal status in most of East Central Europe; the validity of the old concepts of emancipation in a modern world; or the decay of the interwar system of international cooperation – just to mention a few. German Jews, their leading representative institutions and international Jewish organizations engaged in migration assistance needed to take this entire setting into account when evaluating the German-Jewish situation. Given the

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<sup>5</sup> Joseph Marcus, *Social and Political History of the Jews in Poland, 1919–1939*, Berlin 1983, 390 and 400.

<sup>6</sup> Günther Schubert, *Erkaufte Flucht. Der Kampf um den Haavara-Transfer*, Berlin 2009, 7.

multitude of problems awaiting comprehensive solutions, questions of flight and rescue of the German Jews were hardly a priority; nor did the dichotomy of staying versus leaving live up to the complexity of the situation.

In discussing a variety of challenges faced by German Jews in the 1930s that had little to do with Nazi anti-Jewish politics, this article questions a number of assumptions about Jewish migration problems of the time that are commonly shared in research today. To this end, it will emphasize two shifts in perspective: a temporal and a spatial one. An analysis of the background against which German Jews evaluated their situation should neither be limited to the domestic situation of Germany nor to the years 1933 to 1945, but extend to the wider international context of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Here, this implies the assessment of temporal and spatial preconditions determining later processes of evaluation under the Nazi regime. Consequently, reactions of the Western as well as the Jewish world to the different events of 1938 may be better understood, and moral judgment thereof more balanced.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Spatial Shift: Challenges to European Migration**

For the German Jews, 1938 was with no doubt a year of international crisis. The *Anschluss* of Austria by Germany was one among many steps towards the revision of its national borders, and more generally the European territorial order created after World War I. Furthermore, the unregulated and violent expulsion of almost 200,000 Austrian Jews across German borders was meant as a warning to the world: Our “Jewish problem” will also soon be yours. The enormous attention the events of 1938 received by the international

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<sup>7</sup> There are a number of publications, which in one way or another share some basic ideas presented in this article: Dan Michman, *Handeln und Erfahrung. Bewältigungsstrategien im Kontext der jüdischen Geschichte*, in: Frank Bajohr/Andrea Löw (eds.), *Der Holocaust. Ergebnisse und neue Fragen der Forschung*, Bonn 2015, 255–277; Hagit Lavsky, *The Creation of the German-Jewish Diaspora. Interwar German-Jewish Immigration to Palestine, the USA, and England*, Berlin 2017; Doron Niederland, *Jews from Germany. Emigrants or Refugees? Migration Patterns of German Jews between the Wars*, Jerusalem 1996 (Hebr.); Guy Miron, *The Waning of Emancipation. Jewish History, Memory, and the Rise of Fascism in Germany, France, and Hungary*, Detroit, Mich., 2011; Diner, *Die Katastrophe vor der Katastrophe*; Frank Caestecker/Bob Moore (eds.), *Refugees from Nazi Germany and the Liberal European States*, New York/Oxford 2010.

community ended a long period of indifference and silence by both the politicians and media towards the German Jews that had set in after 1933.

In April 1938, the American journalist Dorothy Thompson, who had been following the political developments in Nazi Germany from the beginning, wrote an article for *Foreign Affairs*, demanding tremendous international efforts to address, in her words, “a world problem.” In her view, the opinion that anti-Semitic persecution was a domestic issue needed to be abandoned immediately:

“The responsible political circles in the world find it too ticklish a problem to tackle because it may imply interference in the internal affairs of the various countries and also because they are afraid that to raise the question of emigration might produce anti-Semitism in their own respective countries. [...] As anti-Semitic policies spread through Europe it becomes clearer and clearer that charity is not enough. The problem, it should be repeated, must be regarded and treated as one of international politics. The only approach to a solution must be a political approach. And, as things are at present, it can be made only by an organization headed by outstanding personalities of the democratic world, with the full collaboration of Jewish organizations everywhere, and enjoying the sympathetic collaboration and support of the democratic governments.”<sup>8</sup>

As if responding directly to Thompson’s demands, the Evian Conference, convened by American President Franklin D. Roosevelt in July 1938, meant to demonstrate that the global scope of the situation and the need for international efforts had been understood.<sup>9</sup> While the conference hardly yielded any tangible results, it achieved the internationalization of an issue that had been classified as domestic before.<sup>10</sup> The subsequent establishment of the Intergovernmental Committee on Political Refugees at least ensured that the

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<sup>8</sup> Dorothy Thompson, Refugees. A World Problem, in: *Foreign Affairs* 16 (April 1938), no. 3, 375–387, 386 f.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Mashberg, American Diplomacy and the Jewish Refugee, 1938–1939, in: *Yivo Annual of Jewish Social Science* 15 (1974), 339–365, here 340–342.

<sup>10</sup> Yehuda Bauer, *My Brother’s Keeper. A History of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee 1929–1939*, Philadelphia, Pa., 1974, 234–236.

persecution of the Jews remained on the agenda of international diplomacy henceforth.<sup>11</sup>

Whereas the international dimension of 1938 seems to be unquestioned, research on the preceding years, however, is primarily focused on developments within Germany: the genesis of anti-Jewish politics by the Nazi regime, the pauperization of the German Jews, German-Jewish reactions to the Nazi onslaught, or emigration patterns of certain professions, such as lawyers, doctors or scientists. Regarding the so-called delayed emigration of German Jews, we are aware of many different factors leading to the alleged misapprehension of the Nazi regime's goals and policies.<sup>12</sup> However, many more insides can be gained by analyzing the Jewish assessment of the situation in Germany in its international dimension in the early 1930s. This includes an answer to the question why the persecution of the Jews by Nazi Germany – and de-facto revocation of “civilized standards” of the Western world – was not perceived as an event as unique as it appears to us today.

However, many more insides can be gained by analyzing the Jewish assessment of the situation in Germany in its international dimension before 1938. The era of European mass migration begun in the early 1870s, when the first larger groups of Jews left Romania and the Tsarist Empire. Figures skyrocketed in the following decades, as voluntary and forced migration in unprecedented scope and size, persecution of minorities, expulsion, irredentism, population transfer and exchange, pogroms, large-scale massacres, and even genocide became ubiquitous phenomena. Tens of

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<sup>11</sup> Fritz Kieffer, *Judenverfolgung in Deutschland – eine innere Angelegenheit? Internationale Reaktionen auf die Flüchtlingsproblematik 1933–1939*, Stuttgart 2002, 155–427; Ralph Weingarten, *Die Hilfeleistung der westlichen Welt bei der Endlösung der deutschen Judenfrage. Das “Intergovernmental Committee on Political Refugees” (IGC) 1938–1939*, Bern/Frankfurt a. M./New York 1981; Tommie Sjöberg, *The Powers and the Persecuted. The Refugee Problem and the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees (IGCR), 1938–1947*, L and 1991.

<sup>12</sup> The most relevant references for the history of German Jewry are: Avraham Barkai/Paul Mendes-Flohr, *Renewal and Destruction, 1918–1945*, with an Epilogue by Steven M. Lowenstein, New York 1998; Wolfgang Benz (ed.), *Die Juden in Deutschland 1933–1945. Leben unter nationalsozialistischer Herrschaft*, Munich 1988; Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews*; Marion A. Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair. Jewish Life in Nazi Germany*, New York 1998; Francis R. Nicosia/David Scrase (eds.), *Jewish Life in Nazi Germany. Dilemmas and Responses*, New York 2010; Arnold Paucker (ed.), *Die Juden im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland/The Jews in Nazi Germany 1933–1943*, Tübingen 1986.

millions of people were on the move.<sup>13</sup> Whereas the majority of migrants before World War I had come from Eastern and South Eastern Europe, the 1920s and 1930s saw the mass migration of political refugees from persecution by nationalistic, authoritarian or fascist regimes across Europe.<sup>14</sup> Between 1922 and 1924, more than 1,5 million people fled Benito Mussolini's fascist regime, leading to a staggering seven million Italians living abroad in 1927; hundreds of thousands of Germans emigrated to mostly neighboring countries after 1933; and Austria's fascist Dollfuss regime in Austria produced thousands of refugees. In 1936, a new conflict flared up: the Spanish Civil War. With the impending defeat of the Republican forces in the course of 1938, another two million refugees crossed the border to France, and after Franco's victory in 1939, hundreds of thousands more would follow.

In Eastern Europe, the conditions for religious and ethnic minorities, and primarily the Jews, worsened dramatically during the 1930s. The Polish, Romanian, Hungarian, Lithuanian and Latvian Jews were incrementally deprived of their citizen rights, driven into poverty, attacked, humiliated and murdered in pogroms.<sup>15</sup> The situation was worst in Poland. Ezra Mendelsohn describes the period between 1935 and 1939 as a downright "war against the Jews."<sup>16</sup> In 1936, ritual slaughter was prohibited by law, some universities established designated areas for Jews called "ghetto benches," and in 1937, many professional associations introduced "Aryan" clauses into their membership regulations. A nationwide boycott of Jewish businesses did not only expose Jews to increasingly frequent acts of violence, but gave rise to the pauperization of the Polish Jewish community and thus struggle for their very

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<sup>13</sup> Michael Marrus, *The Unwanted. European Refugees in the 20th Century*, New York et al. 1985; Tara Zahra, *Great Departure. Mass Migration from Eastern Europe and the Making of the Free World*, New York/London 2016, 23–104; Peter Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee*, Oxford 2015; Tony Kushner/Katharine Knox, *Refugees in an Age of Genocide. Global, National and Local Perspectives during the Twentieth Century*, London et al. 1999.

<sup>14</sup> For more on this movement and the following figures, see Marrus, *The Unwanted*, 123–157; Kushner/Knox, *Refugees in an Age of Genocide*, 103–171.

<sup>15</sup> Ezra Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe between the World Wars*, Bloomington, Ind., 1983; Bauer, *My Brother's Keeper*, 180–222; Bela Vago/George L. Mosse (eds.), *Jews and Non-Jews in Eastern Europe, 1918–1945*, New York 1975; Emanuel Melzer, *No Way Out. The Politics of Polish Jewry 1935–1939*, Cincinnati, Oh., 1997; Marcus, *Social and Political History of the Jews in Poland*, 349–386.

<sup>16</sup> Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe between the World Wars*, 73.



survival.<sup>17</sup> After 1936, anti-Jewish pogroms became “a common occurrence” in Poland.<sup>18</sup>

By the mid-1930s, the situation in Eastern Europe had deteriorated to a level that made many contemporaries fear the end of Eastern European, if not world Jewry. Many Jewish voices predicted the impending destruction of East European and henceforth World Jewry. Nazi Germany and its anti-Jewish politics were only a part, and by far not the most significant one, of those fears and sinister predictions. Rabbi Dr. Joshua Thon of Poland<sup>19</sup> or Polish-Jewish sociologist and demographer Jakob Lestschinsky, tried to alert the world to the catastrophe that was slowly unfolding in Poland and called on colleagues to respond urgently to what they perceived as “a crisis of World Jewry”<sup>20</sup> describing the alarming situation that “3,500,000 Polish Jews are literally on the verge of the abyss.”<sup>21</sup> Those warnings were no exceptions but the rule, and they had dire consequences for the whole Jewish migration system in interwar Europe.

By 1935, Poland had taken Germany’s place, at least in the eyes of the public, as the most hostile anti-Jewish environment. At a conference of Polish Jewish leaders early that year, Chief Rabbi Dr. Rubenstein of Vilnius appealed to the Jewish world that “German Jewry’s calamity must not be allowed to overshadow the Polish Jewish catastrophe.”<sup>22</sup> In the course of the following months more and more Jewish voices aligned with Rabbi Rubenstein’s message. A year later, the famous Communist Karl Radek, a former Communist International member and now journalist, went even further saying that “what Poland is preparing for her Jewish population will exceed the cruelty of the German manifold.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Heller, *On the Edge of Destruction*, 77–139; Melzer, *No Way Out*, 39–94.

<sup>18</sup> Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe between the World Wars*, 74.

<sup>19</sup> *Despair Faces Polish Jewry, Leaders Claim*, Jewish Telegraphic Agency, 6 January 1935.

<sup>20</sup> Jakob Lestschinsky, *Der wirtschaftliche Zusammenbruch der Juden in Deutschland und Polen*, Paris/Geneva 1936, 3. Unless indicated otherwise, all translations from German into English are done by the author.

<sup>21</sup> *Despair Faces Polish Jewry, Leaders Claim*, Jewish Telegraphic Agency, 6 January 1935.

<sup>22</sup> *Despair Faces Polish Jewry, Leaders Claim*.

<sup>23</sup> *Radek Holds Polish Treatment of Jews Worse Than Nazi*, Jewish Telegraphic Agency, 18 March 1936.

Not only did Polish or other Eastern European Jews deem their own situation more dangerous than that of their German brethren, but this perception took hold in Germany itself as well. The German-Jewish teacher Heinemann Stern described in his autobiography a conversation with a former student, who had just come back from a trip to Poland in 1936 or 1937. He was shocked by the terrible conditions that prevailed in Poland and finished his report to Stern with the words: “Compared to Poland, Germany is still a paradise today.”<sup>24</sup> Similar opinions were expressed in those years by Franz Meyer, a leading official of the Zionist umbrella organization Zionistische Vereinigung für Deutschland, predicting that “the situation of the Jews in Poland will soon overshadow the Jewish situation in Germany,”<sup>25</sup> by Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann,<sup>26</sup> or, in May 1937, by Kurt Löwenstein, co-editor of the leading Zionist newspaper *Jüdische Rundschau*, who wrote: “Sure, the political conditions in which the Jews of Germany now live are of particular significance. Nonetheless, the social-economic misery of the Jews in some countries of the East is much worse.”<sup>27</sup>

All this was not only public rhetoric to raise the awareness of the Western world, to put the German Jewish predicament into perspective or soothe the troubled German Jews. It was, above all, the outline of a global scenario that linked any solution for the German Jews to the fate of their Eastern European coreligionists. Those Jewish organizations and representatives in charge of upholding the global system of emigration assistance, which had been largely successful for more than fifty years, had to take this global scenario into account.<sup>28</sup>

According to contemporary historian Aviva Halamish, until November 1938, Zionist leaders of the Jewish Agency “widely conceived the situation of

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<sup>24</sup> Heinemann Stern, *Warum hassen sie uns eigentlich? Jüdisches Leben zwischen den Kriegen. Erinnerungen*, Düsseldorf 1970, 184.

<sup>25</sup> Reich Zionist Declares Situation of Polish Jews Will Overshadow German, Jewish Telegraphic Agency, 31 January 1936.

<sup>26</sup> Chaim Weizmann to Stephen S. Wise, 27 February 1936, in: Barnet Litvinoff (ed.), *The Letters and Papers of Chaim Weizmann*, vol. 17, Series A: August 1935–December 1936, ed. by Yemima Rosenthal, New Brunswick/Jerusalem 1979, 199–202, here 201.

<sup>27</sup> Kurt Löwenstein, *Leben, nichts als leben!*, in: *Jüdische Rundschau* 42, no. 40, 21 May 1937.

<sup>28</sup> The Jewish organization’s plans and policies concerning the emigration of the German Jews in the early 1930s are explored in David Jünger, *Jahre der Ungewissheit. Emigrationspläne deutscher Juden 1933–1938*, Göttingen/Bristol, Conn., 2016.

the Jews of Eastern Europe and particularly of Poland, as worse than that of their brethren in Germany.”<sup>29</sup> Consequently, they assigned the very much needed immigration certificates of the category “Labour C” predominantly to Eastern European Jews.<sup>30</sup> The total percentage of Germans among Jewish immigrants to Palestine – including those arriving on a “Capitalist A” immigration certificate without quota limitations – was 16 in 1934, 11 in 1935, 27 in 1936 and 34 in 1937. Throughout the 1930s, Polish Jews also received more labour certificates than German Jews.<sup>31</sup> Stephen S. Wise, President of the American Jewish Congress (AJC), was one of the most adamant and outspoken American Jewish adversaries of the Nazi regime. In March 1933 he predicted: “What is happening in Germany today may happen tomorrow in any other land on earth unless it is challenged and rebuked. It is not the German Jews who are being attacked. It is the Jews.”<sup>32</sup>

With the despair growing in Poland and other Eastern European countries, his predictions seemed to come true. At the AJC’s national convention in late 1937, its Chairman, M. Maldwin Fertig, recapitulated the previous year’s efforts:

“While previously our main concern on the European Continent had been with the fate of the half million Jews under the Nazi regime it now moved eastward toward the three and a quarter Million Jews in the resurrected Republic of Poland. Gradually the Polish crisis overshadowed the Nazi calamity [...]”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Aviva Halamish, *Palestine as a Destination for Jewish Immigrants and Refugees from Nazi Germany*, in: Caestecker/Moore (eds.), *Refugees from Nazi Germany and the Liberal European States*, 122–150, here 127.

<sup>30</sup> The British Mandate authority regulated Jewish immigration through different immigration certificates. Certificate “Labour C” roughly pertained to people in working age and condition without financial means. The amount of those C-certificates was fixed and their allocation was entrusted to the Jewish Agency. Everyone being able to prove the possession of 1,000 pound sterling in free convertible currency could immigrate on a “Capitalist A” certificate.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>32</sup> Cit. in Melvin I. Urofsky, *A Voice That Spoke for Justice. The Life and Times of Stephen S. Wise*, New York 1982, 265.

<sup>33</sup> American Jewish Historical Society Archives, New York, I-77: American Jewish Congress Records, Box 835: National Biennial Conventions, Folder 4: National Convention 1937, National Convention of the American Jewish Congress, held at Hotel Willard, New York, November 27 and 28, 1937.

The different doom scenarios hovering over the Jewish public of the 1930s led to a variety of emergency plans basically consisting of large scale emigration schemes. The evacuation plan of Vladimir Jabotinsky was the most prominent one. Having first voiced his ideas in the late 1920s, Jabotinsky introduced his rescue plan from “an unprecedented catastrophe”<sup>34</sup> into the newly founded revisionist New Zionist Organization in 1935.<sup>35</sup> This catastrophe was about to unfold in the whole of Europe, he predicted in his 1937 book *The Jewish State*, but Poland, from which hundreds of thousands of Jews needed to emigrate in order to mitigate or slow down the inevitable, would be its center.<sup>36</sup> His proclaimed goal was to resettle 1,5 million Jews in Palestine within ten years: 700,000 from Poland, 200,000 from Romania, 200,000 from Germany, 50,000 from Lithuania, and 350,000 from other countries.<sup>37</sup> Throughout the 1930s, until he officially abandoned his plan in 1939, those proportions remained largely unchanged, and at no point were the German Jews central to his considerations.<sup>38</sup> It is crucial to have this perception of priorities in mind in order to understand the migration setting of German Jews in the 1930s. Different Jewish sources gave different figures of how many European Jews were in jeopardy – two, five or six million<sup>39</sup> – but there was an unanimous understanding that a solution to the threat of Jewish existence in Europe had to encompass first and foremost Eastern European Jewries, and Germans only in second place.

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<sup>34</sup> Wladimir Jabotinsky, *Der Judenstaat* [1937], Vienna 1938, 17.

<sup>35</sup> For the genesis of the evacuation plan, see Marcus, *Social and Political History of the Jews in Poland, 1919–1939*, 396–401; Dan Michman, *Holocaust Historiography. A Jewish Perspective. Conceptualizations, Terminology, Approaches and Fundamental Issues*, London et al. 2003, 205–216; Joseph B. Schechtman, *The Vladimir Jabotinsky Story*, vol. 2: *Fighter and Prophet. The Last Years*, New York et al. 1961, 334–363; Jabotinsky, *Der Judenstaat*; idem, *The War and the Jews*, New York 1942.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Michman, *Holocaust Historiography*, 205–216. Michman speaks out against a popular claim that Jabotinsky anticipated the destruction of the European Jews by Nazi Germany and was the first to work on their rescue.

<sup>39</sup> Whereas Jabotinsky spoke of 1,5 million, the German Zionist Max Apt thought of between two and 3,5 million. The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (Joint) even expected five million and Arthur Prinz six million Jews, who would need to be rescued. Max Apt, *Konstruktive Auswanderungspolitik. Ein Beitrag zur jüdischen Überseekolonisation*, Berlin 1936, 9 and 14; Arthur Prinz, *Voraussetzungen jüdischer Auswanderungspolitik*, in: *Der Morgen* 12, no. 1, April 1936. For Joint’s figures, see JDC and Polish Jewry, in: *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, 8 January 1935.

Looking for destinations that could provide a political, religious and economic shelter for the tormented Jews of Europe proved to be a disaster of a different kind. The era of mass migration had not only produced millions of refugees, but had prompted many countries all over the world to tighten their immigration regulations. Most dramatic was the retreat of the United States from its pivotal role as a haven for the oppressed and impoverished. The US immigration laws of 1921 and 1924 practically closed the door for future European immigrants.<sup>40</sup> Likewise, the possibilities of settling in other European countries shrank, as the desire to keep refugees out of local job markets began to outweigh the continent's principle of freedom of movement.<sup>41</sup>

Jewish Palestine, which some Jewish representatives like Vladimir Jabotinsky hoped would become the home for the majority of European Jews in distress, was in the 1930s far from offering a durable solution. To the contrary, in the period between the late 1920s and the 1930s, the Zionist project faced its greatest crisis since Jewish colonization of Palestine had begun some decades before. The Zionist Organization basically lacked the support of the diaspora Jews – ideologically as well as financially. Immigration figures were also low. Between 1926 and 1928, more Jews left than immigrated to Palestine. After failing to settle into the new place, fifteen thousand Jews, or 74 percent of the immigrants of 1926 and 1927, eventually returned to their former homes.<sup>42</sup> As historian Tom Segev noted, “a sense of despair” – economic and social – spread throughout the country,<sup>43</sup> which was followed by open violence: After anti-Jewish pogroms in Hebron and other towns and villages in 1929, and an investigation of possible reasons and

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<sup>40</sup> Roger Daniels, *Guarding the Golden Door. American Immigration Policy and Immigrants since 1882*, New York 2004, 27–58; John Higham, *Strangers in the Land. Patterns of American Nativism 1860–1925*, New Brunswick, N. J., 1955, 264–330; Robert A. Divine, *American Immigration Policy, 1924–1952*, New Haven, Conn./London 1957, 1–91.

<sup>41</sup> Caestecker/Moore (eds.), *Refugees from Nazi Germany and the Liberal European States*; Marcus, *The Unwanted*, 135–157; Theodore S. Hamerow, *Why We Watched. Europe, America, and the Holocaust*, New York et al. 2008, 33–170.

<sup>42</sup> Gudrun Krämer, *Geschichte Palästinas. Von der osmanischen Eroberung bis zur Gründung des Staates Israel*, Munich 2002, 227.

<sup>43</sup> Tom Segev, *One Palestine, Complete. Jews and Arabs under the British Mandate*, London 2000, 261.

counter-strategies a year later, the British mandatory power published the second White Paper, which curtailed Jewish immigration to Palestine.<sup>44</sup>

From today's perspective, despite all ups and downs, the development of Jewish Palestine towards the foundation of the State of Israel in 1948 seems a rather steady one. This perspective is deceptive though, as the colonization project was constantly overhung with possible collapse during the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>45</sup> The Jewish Agency was preoccupied with the economic crisis in Palestine, with repelling the attacks of the revisionist movement and the increasing tensions with the Arab population. The Arab uprising, beginning in 1936, led to an almost complete stop of Jewish immigration as per the British White Paper of 1939.<sup>46</sup> Among German Zionist leaders, belief in Palestine and its capacity to take in any more German Jews was fading. In early 1936, the head of the German Palestine Office, Arthur Prinz, invoked the "inadequacy of Palestine as a place of immigration" and claimed that "although Palestine has a unique and indispensable meaning for the renewal of Judaism it does not at all offer a comprehensive solution for the Jewish problem."<sup>47</sup>

The Jewish leaders had to reckon with the global increase on Jewish migration and the limited actions of immigration destinations when they envisioned emigration schemes for the German Jews. Prinz described a possible scenario resulting from this circumstance as "tremendous destabilization of the Jewish situation not only in Germany but also in Poland, Romania, Austria, Hungary and other countries – actually in more or less the entire area between the Baltic Sea and the Aegean Sea, the Russian Western border and the Rhine inhabited by six million Jews."<sup>48</sup>

Since the political, and even more so the economic situation of (Jewish) refugees in Europe was devastating, the choices for German Jews were very limited. Nothing can demonstrate this more impressively than the return of Jewish migrants to Nazi Germany. In late 1934 and throughout 1935,

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<sup>44</sup> Krämer, *Geschichte Palästinas*, 306–344; Segev, *One Palestine, Complete*, 314–341.

<sup>45</sup> See also Dan Diner, *Konflikte begreifen*, in: idem, *Zeitenschwelle. Gegenwartsfragen an die Geschichte*, Munich 2010, 67–89.

<sup>46</sup> Segev, *One Palestine, Complete*, 397–443.

<sup>47</sup> Prinz, *Voraussetzungen jüdischer Auswanderungspolitik*.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

thousands of Jews, who had left Germany after 30 January 1933, returned from exile to their former homes. The reasons for the immigrants to return varied widely, but most of them had faced harsh economic conditions, frequently very unwelcoming immigration laws and regulations in their host countries, and huge difficulties to adapt culturally and linguistically to their new surroundings. To them, future prospects in Germany seemed still to be better than living under utmost precarious conditions in France, the Netherlands, Great Britain or Czechoslovakia.<sup>49</sup>

With all this in mind, it becomes obvious that the Jewish situation in Germany and all questions of Jewish emigration after 1933 were not defined by Germany alone. They were rather part and parcel of a much bigger setting, namely the era of mass migration and the deterioration of the Jewish status on a European and even global scale.

### **The Temporal Shift: Challenges of the Emancipation Era**

Even though the political and economic situation of European Jews was appalling in the early 1930s, and the rise of the Nazis to the highest ranks of German politics to be expected, the appointment of Adolf Hitler as Reich Chancellor on 30 January 1933 still came as a shock to many. It was the first time that an outspoken anti-Semite gained power in a state of the Western hemisphere.

The immediate post-World War I period had been characterized by vicious allegations against the German Jews of which the so-called stab-in-the-back myth was only the most prevalent one. Frequently, those allegations turned into open violence directed against the Jews, peaking in 1922 and 1923 with the assassination of Walther Rathenau and anti-Jewish pogroms in the Berlin Scheunenviertel respectively.<sup>50</sup> The so-called “golden twenties,”

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<sup>49</sup> Doron Niederland, *Back into the Lion's Jaws. A Note on Jewish Return Migration to Nazi Germany (1933–1938)*, in: *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* 9 (1993), 174–180. For exact figures of the early migration flow, see Herbert A. Strauss, *Jewish Emigration from Germany. Nazi Policies and Jewish Responses (I)*, in: *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 25 (1980), 313–361, here 354 f.

<sup>50</sup> Donald L. Niewyk, *The Jews in Weimar Germany. With a New Introduction by the Author*, New Brunswick, N. J./London 2001, 43–81; Werner Jochman, *Die Ausbreitung des Antisemitismus*, in: Werner E. Mosse (ed.), *Deutsches Judentum in Krieg und Revolution*

between 1924 and 1929, proved to be comparably peaceful, both for Jews and the Weimar Republic in general. However, this relative quiet came to an end again shortly after, as Jews saw their legal status questioned, their political influence diminished, and themselves subjected to even more frequent and violent anti-Semitic proclamations. After 1929, the Nazi movement grew stronger every year, while the decline of liberal forces was a disastrous loss for the Jews.<sup>51</sup>

Against this background, matters such as the future of Jewish emancipation and the survival of German Jewry were vividly discussed by the Jewish public. Depending on which ideological or religious camp the respective participant belonged to, the proposed solutions differed. In those debates, four major camps may be identified: the German-national, the liberal, the Zionist, and finally the religious, observant or Orthodox Jews.<sup>52</sup> The German-national Jews claimed that full emancipation could only be accomplished if German Jews relinquished any Jewish particularity, pledged full allegiance to the German nation and transformed Judaism into a solely private matter with almost no other meaning than domestic customs.<sup>53</sup> The liberal Jews agreed with the call for German nationalism, but opposed what they perceived as a dilution of Judaism. In their understanding, the bond between “Germanness” and “Jewishness” – *Deutschtum* and *Judentum* – as

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1916–1923. Ein Sammelband, Tübingen 1971, 409–510; Cornelia Hecht, *Deutsche Juden und Antisemitismus in der Weimarer Republik*, Bonn 2003, 55–186; Dirk Walter, *Antisemitische Kriminalität und Gewalt. Judenfeindschaft in der Weimarer Republik*, Bonn 1999, 23–142.

<sup>51</sup> Werner E. Mosse, *Der Niedergang der Weimarer Republik und die Juden*, in: idem (ed.), *Entscheidungsjahr 1932. Zur Judenfrage in der Endphase der Weimarer Republik*, 2nd, revised and extended volume, Tübingen 1966, 3–49; Hecht, *Deutsche Juden und Antisemitismus in der Weimarer Republik*, 206–268; Walter, *Antisemitische Kriminalität und Gewalt*, 200–243.

<sup>52</sup> Donald L. Niewyk addresses only three groups, leaving out the religious camp. Niewyk, *The Jews in Weimar Germany*. This is justified insofar as the political camps are of a different character than the religious one and as religious belongings overlapped with different ideological leanings. That means that, for instance, Orthodox Jews could be found in all ideological camps, especially in the Zionist one, to a lesser extent in the German national and even in the (political) liberal one. On the other hand, Orthodox organizations and newspapers also acted politically and had different opinions from the ideological camps on a variety of topics. An analysis of the particularities of the religious camp as compared to the political ones would offer a more comprehensive picture of the whole setting.

<sup>53</sup> Niewyk, *The Jews in Weimar Germany*, 165–177.



two sides of the same coin needed to be upheld.<sup>54</sup> The Zionists, however, deemed the way Jewish emancipation had unfolded a failure. In their eyes, Jews remained Jews, no matter how desperate their efforts to be respected as Germans. The Jewish question, Zionists were sure, would only be solved if Jews stopped to disguise themselves as Germans – as they depicted it – and confessed to their Jewishness without reservation.<sup>55</sup> Observant and Orthodox Jews likewise disparaged the development of Jewish emancipation. But unlike the Zionists, they believed that only an unrestricted return – *teschuwoh* – to the eternal and indisputable foundations of Judaism could remedy the current Jewish predicament.<sup>56</sup>

As Jewish emancipation as a whole seemed to be at stake, almost all voices of this debate located the problems of the late 1920s and early 1930s within the larger context of the emancipation era, and used it as their main reference point. In the late eighteenth century, this new era had been heralded by the works of Moses Mendelssohn, the emergence of the Haskala and by the French Revolution in 1789.<sup>57</sup> But the path to full emancipation turned out to be a twisted one, uncertain to be ever completed. Almost a hundred years after the French, German Jews were granted full equality before the law following German unification in 1871. However, they continued to be denied social equality. Moreover, with the rise of political anti-Semitism since the 1880s, the revocation of legal equality became a permanent threat. Ultimately, the fulfillment of Jewish emancipation and therefore equality in all spheres of life

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<sup>54</sup> Avraham Barkai, *Between Deutschtum and Judentum. Ideological Controversies within the Centralverein*, in: Nils Roemer (ed.), *German Jewry. Between Hope and Despair*, Brighton, Mass., 2013, 259–278; Niewyk, *The Jews in Weimar Germany*, 96–124.

<sup>55</sup> Niewyk, *The Jews in Weimar Germany*, 125–164; Lavsky, *Before Catastrophe*; Stephen Poppel, *Zionism in Germany, 1897–1933. The Shaping of a Jewish Identity*, Philadelphia, Pa., 1976.

<sup>56</sup> Yehuda Ben-Avner, *Vom orthodoxen Judentum in Deutschland zwischen zwei Weltkriegen*, Hildesheim/Zürich/New York 1987; Matthias Morgenstern, *From Frankfurt to Jerusalem. Isaac Breuer and the History of the Secession Dispute in Modern Jewish Orthodoxy*, Leiden/Boston, Mass./Cologne 2002; David J. Pruwer, *A Sacred Tradition within Mundane History. Rabbi Unna and the Orthodox Return to History in Interwar Germany*, in: *Modern Judaism* 35 (2015), no. 3, 318–346; David H. Ellenson, *After Emancipation. Jewish Religious Responses to Modernity*, Cincinnati, Oh., 2004, 154–183 and 237–279. Literally translated, the Hebrew term *teschuwo* means “response,” but in this context, it means “turnaround” or “return” to observance of Judaism.

<sup>57</sup> Michael A. Meyer, *The Origins of the Modern Jew. Jewish Identity and European Culture in Germany, 1749–1824*, Detroit, Mich., 1967.

became the primary goal for most German Jews, even though the emerging Zionist and Orthodox camps had different aspirations, or rather a different understanding of what emancipation should mean.

Given this background, it is not surprising that the events of the 1920s and 1930s were interpreted by Jewish contemporaries as only a continuation, or intensification of a long-lasting problem – the struggle for emancipation – traceable all the way back to Moses Mendelsohn.<sup>58</sup> In the late 1920s, almost 150 years after Mendelsohn's death in 1786, the whole emancipation project seemed to be at a crossroads. Not only could social equality not be attained for Jews, but legal equality was also called into question. Finally, the year 1932 was expected to bring the decision about the future of Jewish emancipation and was proclaimed at its outset as *Entscheidungsjahr* (year of decisions).<sup>59</sup> In January, at a general meeting of the *Centralverein deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens*, Chairman Ludwig Holländer predicted:

“The year 1932 will bring about the decision [...] whether the ever increasing demands of the anti-Semites for the disenfranchisement of the Jewish part of the people in Germany will be partly or completely fulfilled. And it will bring about the decision whether we German Jews will be degraded to second class citizens.”<sup>60</sup>

To follow Ludwig Holländer, it was not a question whether the civil rights of Jews would be curtailed, but rather to what extent. Then, the appointment of

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<sup>58</sup> Miron, *The Waning of Emancipation*, 25–30; idem, *Emancipation and Assimilation in the German-Jewish Discourse of the 1930s*, in: *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 48 (2003), 165–189.

<sup>59</sup> Mosse (ed.), *Entscheidungsjahr 1932*. The predictions of decisive decisions that were to be forthcoming were a widespread phenomenon throughout 1932, not only within Jewish debates. Heinrich August Winkler, *The Age of Catastrophe. A History of the West, 1914–1945*, trans. by Stewart Spencer, New Haven, Conn./London 2015, 452–477; Dirk Blasius, *Weimars Ende. Bürgerkrieg und Politik, 1930–1933*, Göttingen 2005, 32–47. The perspective on the last years of the Weimar Republic as a permanent state of “crisis” – as it is presented, for instance, by Winkler – has recently been challenged by Rüdiger Graf and Moritz Föllmer, among others. Moritz Föllmer, *Which Crisis? Which Modernity? New Perspectives on Weimar Germany*, in: Jochen Hung/Godela Weiss-Sussex/Geoff Wilkes (eds.), *Beyond Glitter and Doom. The Contingency of the Weimar Republic*, Munich 2012, 19–30; Rüdiger Graf, *Either – Or. The Narrative of “Crisis” in Weimar Germany and in Historiography*, in: *Central European History* 43 (2010), no. 4, 592–615.

<sup>60</sup> Ludwig Holländer, 1932. *Das Jahr der Entscheidung*, in: *Central-Verein-Zeitung* 11, no. 4, 22 January 1932.

Adolf Hitler as Reich Chancellor was a worrisome event, but still one that was thought to be in line with the long history of ups and downs of the Jewish struggle for emancipation. Surely, the violence of the first months against Communists, Socialists, Unionists or intellectuals, the anti-Jewish boycott of 1 April 1933 and the Civil Service Law of 7 April 1933 were indications that the new government was much more dangerous than any previous regime. “Sternly and concerned, the German Jews look into the future,” Holländer wrote on 2 February 1933, and further: “It does not make sense to disguise the dangers inherent in the fact that the leading men of a party, which champions the fight against the Jews, is now in control of German politics.”<sup>61</sup> Similar views were expressed in the *Jüdische Rundschau* and the *Israelit*, the most widely read newspapers of the Zionist and (Neo-)Orthodox camps respectively, whose authors emphasized that the danger of the first ever explicitly anti-Semitic German Government must not be underestimated.<sup>62</sup>

However, the overall context, that is, the general validity of emancipation, seemed to be unchanged.<sup>63</sup> Even though it is impossible to make a generalized statement about the responses of the Jewish public to the Nazi regime’s rise to power, some broader observations are still possible. Whereas after 30 January 1933 most commentators expressed their belief in the inviolability of the fundamental civil rights of German Jews,<sup>64</sup> this belief was shattered by the passing of the Civil Service Law of 7 April 1933. With Jewish legal rights largely revoked by this law, Zionist, Orthodox and even many liberal Jews assumed the era of emancipation had come to an end.<sup>65</sup> But

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<sup>61</sup> Ludwig Holländer, Die neue Regierung, in: Central-Verein-Zeitung 12, no. 5, 2 February 1933.

<sup>62</sup> Robert Weltsch, Regierung Hitler, in: Jüdische Rundschau 38, no. 9, 31 January 1933; idem., Die neue Lage, in: Der Israelit 74, no. 5, 2 February 1933.

<sup>63</sup> See especially Miron, The Waning of Emancipation; idem., Emancipation and Assimilation in the German-Jewish Discourse of the 1930s.

<sup>64</sup> Weltsch, Regierung Hitler; Erklärung des Präsidiums des C.V., in: Central-Verein-Zeitung, 12, no. 5, 2 February 1933; idem., Die neue Lage.

<sup>65</sup> Alfred Hirschberg, Deutsch-jüdische Wirklichkeit, in: Central-Verein-Zeitung 12, no. 15, 13 April 1933. See also: Robert Weltsch, Jüdische Zwischenbilanz, in: Jüdische Rundschau 38, no. 30/31, 13 April 1933; [n. a.], Ein geschichtlicher Wendepunkt. Wochenrundschau, in: Der Israelit 74, no. 16, 21 April 1933; Jüdische Haltungen zur gegenwärtigen Situation in Deutschland. Versuch einer Abgrenzung, in: Bayerische Israelitische Gemeindezeitung 9, no. 11, 1 June 1933. Even the German Nationalist theologian Hans-Joachim Schoeps proclaimed the end of the era of Jewish emancipation: Hans-Joachim Schoeps, Wir deutschen Juden (June

not everyone was entirely pessimistic: Alfred Hirschberg, editor-in-chief of the *Central-Verein-Zeitung*, mused that the end of one era could also mean the beginning of a new one.<sup>66</sup> This was a view shared rather by Zionist and Orthodox Jews and less by the Centralverein's supporters,<sup>67</sup> although the classification of any voice as representative of one camp or the other would be misleading. Of much greater interest, though, is the fact that the emancipation era remained the predominant reference point for all factions of German Jewry. Most commentators agreed that the "old emancipation" had vanished, and something new had to follow. However, what was seen as new was in most cases a variation, or at least reminiscence, of the old. Those concepts encompassed "group emancipation" versus the "emancipation of the individual,"<sup>68</sup> "new" versus "old emancipation,"<sup>69</sup> "external" versus "internal emancipation,"<sup>70</sup> "dissimilation,"<sup>71</sup> "second emancipation"<sup>72</sup> and so forth.<sup>73</sup> All those ideas linked future prospects to the past, referring to terms, concepts and notions that had been used and developed since the outset of the emancipation era.

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1934), in: idem, "Bereit für Deutschland!" Der Patriotismus deutscher Juden und der Nationalsozialismus. Frühe Schriften 1930 bis 1939. Eine historische Dokumentation, Berlin 1970, 187–195.

<sup>66</sup> Hirschberg, *Deutsch-jüdische Wirklichkeit*.

<sup>67</sup> Weltsch, *Jüdische Zwischenbilanz*; idem, Tragt ihn mit Stolz, den gelben Fleck!, in: *Jüdische Rundschau* 28, no. 27, 4 April 1933; [n. a], Ein geschichtlicher Wendepunkt; Kurt Blumenfeld, Die innerjüdische Seite, in: *Jüdische Rundschau* 28, no. 28/29, 7 April 1933; J. Raphael, Neuer Aufbruch, in: *Der Israelit* 74, no. 17, 27 April 1933.

<sup>68</sup> Robert Weltsch, Um die neue Emanzipation, in: *Jüdische Rundschau* 38, no. 48, 16 June 1933; American Jewish Joint Distribution Archives, Folder 627, Werner Senator, Bemerkungen zu einem wirtschaftlichen Verhandlungsprogramm der deutschen Juden, 15 August 1933; Joachim Prinz, *Wir Juden. Besinnung, Rückblick, Zukunft*, Berlin 1934, 159; Hirschberg, *Deutsch-jüdische Wirklichkeit*.

<sup>69</sup> Hugo Rosenthal, Die deutsche Judenschaft im neuen Deutschen Reich, in: *Jüdische Rundschau*, part 1: 26 May 1933, part 2: 30 May 1933, part 3: 4 July 1933; Eva Reichmann, Unsere Stellung zum Palästina-problem, in: *Central-Verein-Zeitung* 12, no. 31, 3 August 1933.

<sup>70</sup> Heinz Kellermann, Ende der Emanzipation?, in: *Der Morgen* 9, no. 3 (August 1933).

<sup>71</sup> Kurt Löwenstein, Assimilation und Dissimilation, in: *Jüdische Rundschau* 38, no. 78, 29 September 1933; idem, Dissimilation?, in: *Jüdische Rundschau* 39, no. 34, 27 April 1934; Alfred Hirschberg, Dissimilation oder Assimilation?, in: *Central-Verein-Zeitung* 13, no. 18, 3 May 1934. See also Matthias Hambrock, *Die Etablierung der Außenseiter. Der Verband nationaldeutscher Juden 1921–1935*, Cologne 2003, 609–639.

<sup>72</sup> Bruno Weil, *Der Weg der deutschen Juden*, Berlin 1934, 219.

<sup>73</sup> For an overview of this debate and those concepts, see Miron, *Emancipation and Assimilation in the German-Jewish Discourse of the 1930s*.

Especially between 1933 and 1935, many history books were published addressing the history of German, but also European or global Jewry.<sup>74</sup> Their authors, such as the hereinafter-quoted Rabbi Joachim Prinz, expressed their wish “to enhance the understanding of the presence by looking back at the past, because only the understanding of what we used to be [...] provides us with the strength to walk on our new path.”<sup>75</sup> Accordingly, the subtitle of Prinz’ book *Wir Juden* reads *Besinnung, Rückblick, Zukunft* (Reflection, Retrospection, Future). While generally a harsh critic of Prinz, the German national theologian Hans Joachim Schoeps in the main concurred with the former’s invocation of the past: “German Jews are in a crisis today. [...] We need to reflect ourselves, who we are, where we are from and where we go to.”<sup>76</sup> The famous historian Ismar Elbogen, as well, agreed when he wrote:

“Let us remember the history of our fathers, who time and again experienced such catastrophes and still did not give up their will to live! They have adamantly sought and found means and ways to preserve themselves. [...] Our fathers have borne their destiny with heroism, with dignity, and in observant faith. Let us learn from them.”<sup>77</sup>

Understanding the presence by looking back at the past to master the future – this was quite a common strategy in those days. Shortly after the anti-Jewish boycott of 1 April 1933, journalist Robert Weltsch published an article titled *Wear the Yellow Badge with Pride*, which became one of the most notorious Jewish responses to the early Nazi regime. By trying to convert the connotation of a social stigma into something perceived as positive, Weltsch sought to counteract the Nazis’ attacks on Jews. The closing remarks of this article read:

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<sup>74</sup> Weil, *Der Weg der deutschen Juden*; Schoeps, *Wir deutschen Juden*; Simon Schwab, *Heimkehr ins Judentum*, Frankfurt a. M. 1934; Alfred Döblin, *Flucht und Sammlung des Judentums*. Aufsätze und Erzählungen, Amsterdam 1935; Mark Wischnitzer, *Die Juden in der Welt. Gegenwart und Geschichte des Judentums in allen Ländern*, Berlin 1935; Arthur Eloesser, *Vom Ghetto nach Europa. Das Judentum im geistigen Leben des 19. Jh.*, Berlin 1936; Max Wiener, *Jüdische Religion im Zeitalter der Emanzipation*, Berlin 1933; Arnold Zweig, *Bilanz der deutschen Judenheit. Ein Versuch*, Amsterdam 1933; Prinz, *Wir Juden*; Josef Kastein, *Juden in Deutschland*, Vienna 1934.

<sup>75</sup> Prinz, *Wir Juden*, Vorwort.

<sup>76</sup> Schoeps, *Wir deutschen Juden*, 172.

<sup>77</sup> Ismar Elbogen, *Haltung*, in: *Central-Verein-Zeitung* 12, no. 14, 6 April 1933.

“The Jewish answer is clear. It is the brief sentence spoken by the prophet Jonah: *Ivri anochi*, I am a Hebrew. Yes, a Jew. The affirmation of our Jewishness – this is the moral significance of what is happening today. [...] As for us Jews, we can defend our honor. We remember all those who were called Jews, stigmatized as Jews, over a period of five thousand years. We are being reminded that we are Jews. We affirm this and bear it with pride.”<sup>78</sup>

Many Jews would follow his understanding in subsequent years when facing their plight, and the perception of effectiveness of this approach was nourished by the Nazi policies. In almost every sphere of German life and all across the country, authorities suppressed free speech, persecuted the Left, and abolished democratic structures. They did, however, spare the Jewish community as a religious entity – at least initially. Jewish newspapers continued to publish without direct state censorship; most Jewish organizations continued to work permitted to retain democratic structures; and Jewish religious institutions remained largely untroubled by state interference. Jews as individuals were physically attacked, humiliated, and removed from the workplace, but German Jewry as a religious community was hardly touched.<sup>79</sup>

This was the setting in which different ideas of a Jewish future in Germany flourished. The anti-Jewish politics of the Nazi regime combined with a Jewish response as per Weltsch sparked a revival of Jewish cultural and communal life that lasted until at least 1935, if not longer, as some contemporaries later suggested.<sup>80</sup> For those reasons, Jewish – especially

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<sup>78</sup> Robert Weltsch, *Wear the Yellow Badge with Pride*, in: Albert H. Friedlander (ed.), *Out of the Whirlwind. A Reader of Holocaust Literature*, 119–123, here 123. The original German text: Weltsch, *Tragt ihn mit Stolz, den gelben Fleck!*

<sup>79</sup> For the development of anti-Jewish politics in Germany between 1933 and 1935, see: Adam, *Judenpolitik im Dritten Reich*, 55–82; Longerich, *Holocaust*, 29–51; Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, vol. 1, 113–141; Avraham Barkai/Paul Mendes-Flohr, *Renewal and Destruction, 1918–1945*, New York 1997, 197–210.

<sup>80</sup> Robert Weltsch, *An der Wende des modernen Judentums. Betrachtungen aus fünf Jahrzehnten*, Tübingen 1972, 29–34; Michael Brenner, *Jewish Culture in a Modern Ghetto*, in: Francis R. Nicosia/David Scrase (eds.), *Jewish Life in Nazi Germany. Dilemmas and Responses*, New York 2010, 170–184; Barkai/Mendes-Flohr, *Renewal and Destruction*, 283–312.

institutional and religious – life of the 1930s has been described as a period of *Jewish autonomy* or even as a *democratic island* within Nazified Germany.<sup>81</sup>

When finally, in late 1935, the Nuremberg Laws revoked Jewish legal equality and declared Jews second-class state members as compared to German Reich citizens, the predictions of 1932 seemed to have come true: The era of emancipation had come to an end.<sup>82</sup> Nevertheless did the stipulations of the Nuremberg laws, combined with the aforementioned cultural and institutional autonomy granted by authorities, nourish hopes that, at least, the ultimate goal of the Nazi regime regarding the Jews had been accomplished – the absolute separation of the Jewish from the German *Volk* – and would go no further. Following the statements of several Nazi officials right after the promulgation of the Laws, Jews were also led to believe that as a recognized national minority, they would enjoy distinctive rights: minority rights.<sup>83</sup> Especially a comment by Alfred-Ingemar Berndt, the chief editor of the official news agency Deutsches Nachrichtenbüro, was cited in many Jewish publications. Referring to the Zionist Congress that had been convened recently in Lucerne, he wrote: “Today, Germany accommodates the claims of the international Zionist Congress, when it makes the Jews living in Germany a national minority. By making Jewry a national minority, it will again be possible to establish a normal relationship between Germans and Jews.”<sup>84</sup>

His projection of a “normal relationship” between Germans and Jews and the introduction of the term “minority” were indeed remarkable. The minority status was nothing any of the different camps of German Jewry had wanted; but Jewish experiences as minorities, in the pre-emancipation era as

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<sup>81</sup> Herbert A. Strauss, Jewish Autonomy within the Limits of National Socialist Policy. The Communities and the Reichsvertretung, in: Paucker (ed.), *Die Juden im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland 1933–1943*, 125–152; Barkai/Mendes-Flohr, *Renewal and Destruction, 1918–1945*, 258; Carsten Teichert, Chasak! Zionismus im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland 1933–1938, Cologne 2000, 170–175. A contrary position is presented by Heim, “Deutschland muß ihnen ein Land ohne Zukunft sein.”

<sup>82</sup> Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, vol. 1, 141–173; Barkai/Mendes-Flohr, *Renewal and Destruction*, 210–216; Adam, *Judenpolitik im Dritten Reich*, 83–90.

<sup>83</sup> Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, vol. 1, 167–173; Helmut Genschel, *Die Verdrängung der Juden aus der Wirtschaft im Dritten Reich*, Göttingen et al. 1966; Adam, *Judenpolitik im Dritten Reich*, 93.

<sup>84</sup> Gesetzliche Regelung der Judenfrage, in: *Jüdische Allgemeine Zeitung* 38, 18 September 1935.

well as, contemporarily, in some of the Eastern and South Eastern European states, gave good reason to believe that the new situation would be manageable. Thus, the perception prevailed that while German Jews had been deprived of their individual civil rights, they were now granted rights as national group, and Jewish life in Germany would hopefully continue.<sup>85</sup> The analysis of the *Jüdische Allgemeine Zeitung* was characteristic of the debate in the Jewish public shortly after the promulgation of the Laws:

“The Nuremberg laws have fully completed the detachment of the Jews from the German *Volksgemeinschaft*. [...] Those laws put an end to an epoch of about 125 years. [...] We are standing not only at the beginning of a new year but also of a new future. We must look forward to the reconstruction of Jewish life within the now defined legal limits. [...] The new state [...] wants to provide the Jewish minority with a living and economic space, in which it can live and moreover, in which our children can grow up as honest and self-confident human beings.”<sup>86</sup>

Against the backdrop of these public deliberations and expectations, it becomes understandable that emigration was not many people’s preferred option. Of course, tens of thousands of Jews left Germany every year;<sup>87</sup> but this remained an individual rather than collective solution, the latter staying out of consideration. The change of legal status from individual to exclusive group rights could not be fully grasped in its consequences. Most importantly: the overall framework of the continuing struggle for Jewish emancipation in Germany did not change for any of the Jewish fractions. Until around 1937, German Jewry continued to respond to the ongoing crisis roughly the same way as they had prior to the Nazi regime’s coming into power, since they

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<sup>85</sup> Die Nürnberger Gesetze, in: *Jüdische Rundschau* 40, no. 75, 17 September 1935; N. a., Die neuen Reichsgesetze und die Juden, in: *Der Israelit* 76, no. 38, 19 September 1935; Georg Kareski, Deutsche Juden? – Jüdisches Volk., in: *Der Staatszionist* 3, no. 23, 22 September 1935; Alfred Hirschberg, Planung des jüdischen Lebens, in: *Central-Verein-Zeitung* 14, no. 39, 26 September 1935; Executive Board of the Verband Orthodoxer Rabbiner Deutschlands, Ein Wort an die Juden Deutschlands, in: *Der Israelit* 76, no. 39, 26 September 1935.

<sup>86</sup> Rausch haschonoh 5696. Neuaufbau jüdischen Lebens. Das neue Arbeitsprogramm der Reichsvertretung, in: *Jüdische Allgemeine Zeitung* 15, no. 39, 25 September 1935.

<sup>87</sup> For detailed figures, see Werner Rosenstock, Exodus 1933–1939. A Survey of Jewish Emigration from Germany, in: *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 1 (1956), 373–390; Strauss, Jewish Emigration from Germany; idem, Jewish Emigration from Germany. Nazi Policies and Jewish Responses (II), in: *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 26 (1981), 343–404.



sought to explain the present in terms and ideas that derived from a slowly but inevitably vanishing world.<sup>88</sup> In short, with that framework valid in the minds of many Jews, emigration was not an acceptable collective solution. For the German-national and the liberal Jews, emigration would have meant to surrender emancipation in general and to loosen the bond between Germanness and Jewishness and, thus, to give up everything they, their parents and ancestors had been fighting for. This was hardly thinkable. Hans Joachim Schoeps concluded at the time:

“We German Jews have been living for hundreds of years on German lands, we know and confess that no mundane power can rip Germany out of our hearts, that no law and no decree can release us from our duty for *volk* and fatherland. [...] Foremost, we must make sure that we do not perish. To the contrary, in defiance of the false prophets who propose to us emigration or a cultural ghetto, we must endure in pride and dignity despite the utmost limited material living conditions.”<sup>89</sup>

Nor was emigration a solution for the Zionist camp. The establishment of a viable Jewish homeland seemed far off, the project of an unforeseeable future, planned to be a remedy for the plight of Eastern European, rather than Western Jewry.<sup>90</sup> Palestine’s capacity to absorb immigrants was fairly low in the 1930s, not least due to the severe immigration restrictions imposed by the British authorities in the wake of the 1936 riots. Then again, Jewish emigration to destinations other than Palestine seemed to involve the severe risk of dispersion of the Jews and possible disintegration of the Jewish people.<sup>91</sup> To the German Zionists, Zionism meant Jewish nationalism, but on German soil.

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<sup>88</sup> The understanding of 1933 as a crucial watershed is expressed in most research literature on the German 1930s with regard to the Jews. However, only few scholars follow the approach proposed in this article, including: Michman, *Handeln und Erfahrung*; Moshe Zimmermann, *Wie viel Zufall darf Geschichte vertragen? Über politische Zeit- und Krisenwahrnehmung deutscher Juden im Januar 1933*, in: Yfaat Weiss/Raphael Gross (eds.), *Jüdische Geschichte als Allgemeine Geschichte. Festschrift für Dan Diner zum 60. Geburtstag*, Göttingen 2006, 288–302; Strauss, *Jewish Autonomy within the Limits of National Socialist Policy*; Lavsky, *The Creation of the German-Jewish Diaspora*; Niederland, *Juden aus Deutschland*.

<sup>89</sup> Schoeps, *Wir deutschen Juden*, 215 and 224.

<sup>90</sup> Michael Berkowitz, *Western Jewry and the Zionist Project, 1914–1933*, Cambridge et al. 1997.

<sup>91</sup> Paul Eppstein, *Möglichkeiten und Grenzen der Gruppenwanderung*, in: *Jüdische Wohlfahrtspflege und Sozialpolitik* 7 (1937), no. 5, 149–156.

Emigration would have meant to abandon their understanding of the Jewish people as a nation within or by the side of the German nation. Therefore, Weltsch's article *Wear the Yellow Badge with Pride*, was decisive for the Zionist objectives of subsequent years: the consolidation of the Jewish people in Germany, and the restoration of Jewish self-confidence accompanied by a cautious building-up of Jewish Palestine. However, Weltsch's optimism proved to be ill-founded, requiring the Zionists to modify their strategy and objectives after 1935. Nonetheless, the continuation of Jewish life in Germany remained their primary goal. Right after the promulgation of the Nuremberg Laws, Kurt Löwenstein wrote that the Zionist program "is based on the conviction that it is necessary to ensure the material existence of the Jews living in Germany and to enable them to live in dignity. [...] In addition, it recognizes the fact that the reduction of the Jewish substance by organized emigration – that must primarily lead to Palestine – complements this first point."<sup>92</sup> The Zionists faced a predicament: Even though the Jewish situation in Germany turned out to be all but promising, neither Palestine nor other emigration destinations offered any adequate solution. Within the leadership of the Zionistische Vereinigung für Deutschland, it was first and foremost Arthur Prinz who was serious about the adoption of a Zionist emigration policy. It was not until 1936 that the rest of the Zionist leadership yielded to his unrelenting calls and agreed to the inevitability of an emigration policy, which they then implemented slowly.<sup>93</sup>

Finally, observant and Orthodox Jews excluded emigration as an option, as under the halachic rule *dina de-malkhuta dina* (the law of the land/kingdom is law) subordination under the mundane power was a sacred duty. For them, it hardly mattered where they would endure the lot of exile, in

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<sup>92</sup> Kurt Löwenstein, Das Programm, in: Jüdische Rundschau 40, no. 77, 24 September 1935.

<sup>93</sup> Arthur Prinz, Die Erkenntnisse der Judenfrage als Aufgabe unserer Generation, in: Der jüdische Wille 3 (April 1935), no. 3; idem, Das Problem der Emigration, in: Jüdische Rundschau 40, no. 77, 24 September 1935; idem, Voraussetzungen jüdischer Auswanderungspolitik; Arthur Prinz, Thesen zur Wanderungsfrage, in: Der Morgen 12 (Dezember 1936), no. 9; idem, Jüdische Wanderungspolitik heute und morgen, in: Der Morgen 13 (May 1937), no. 2.

Germany or any other country.<sup>94</sup> Rabbi Simon Schwab, who would later gain fame as rabbi of New York's German-Jewish neighborhood Washington Heights, where he served from the late 1950s through the 1990s, commented on the state of Germany in 1933, when he was only 25 years old, in rather lofty words:

“Menacing thunderclouds have gathered over the German Jews. [...] The grey evening shadows of the *golus* yield to the night. It has become dark around us. For hundreds of years, German Jewry has known the frosty night breeze [Nachthauch] of the *golus* only from afar, but has never experienced it up close. [...] A fervent wave of *teschuwo* should flood over Germany's Jews. To resist the distress is futile, to learn from it – that is the slogan. Let us bear the *golus*, as proud Jews!”<sup>95</sup>

Apart from those rather abstract considerations, Jewish religious life did not face severe restrictions at the time. The daily life of Orthodox communities felt less affected by what was happening in the rest of Nazi Germany. The historian Avraham Barkai, who grew up in a neo-Orthodox community in the Berlin Scheunenviertel in the 1930s, recorded in his memoirs:

“A sheltered childhood and carefree adolescence was a rarity in this environment, even rarer for Jewish children after 1933. [...] However, in general, I was lucky that I was spared from violence against me and anti-Semitic persecution, which most of my Jewish peers were exposed to. From my first to my last school year, I attended Jewish schools and spent the afternoons in a protected Jewish environment [...].”<sup>96</sup>

Mally Dienemann, the wife of the Offenbach Rabbi Max Dienemann, had a similar experience: “Despite the barrage of propaganda fire against the Jews

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<sup>94</sup> Andreas Gotzmann, Art. “Dina de-malkhuta dina,” in: Enzyklopädie jüdischer Geschichte und Kultur. Im Auftrag der Sächsischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Leipzig ed. by Dan Diner, vol. 2, Stuttgart 2002, 138–143; Shmuel Shilo/Menachem Elon, Art. “Dina de-Malkhuta Dina,” in: Encyclopaedia Judaica, vol. 5, ed. by Fred Skolnik and Michael Berenbaum, Detroit, Mich., et al. 2007, 663–669.

<sup>95</sup> Schwab wrote under the pseudonym “Nechunia”: Nechunia, Die Losung der Stunde, part 1, in: Der Israelit 74, no. 12, 23 March 1933. *Golus* means Diaspora.

<sup>96</sup> Avraham Barkai, Erlebtes und Gedachtes. Erinnerungen eines unabhängigen Historikers, Göttingen 2011, 14 and 18.

[...] in Offenbach, one personally remained undisturbed until the end of 1938.”<sup>97</sup>

As mentioned before, the reactions of the different Jewish groups, organizations and individuals towards the Nazi onslaught were very diverse and cannot be presented in a generalized manner. However, almost all of them were based on the same premise: What they believed was at stake, was the history and legacy of Jewish emancipation. Against this background, it becomes clear that emigration was not the biggest concern, even though it became more prevalent towards 1937 and early 1938. To put it bluntly: Until the end of 1937, the majority of the German Jews seemed to see no need for emigration.

What has been outlined so far remained the major frame of reference for German Jews until 1937. During this time, and even more so the following year, circumstances changed rapidly. Due to the unremitting deterioration of the legal status and economic situation of the Jews, emigration ultimately became the absolute focus of Jewish efforts and most haunting endeavor. An increasing number of German Jews considered to emigrate and began preparations to do so. But again, those preparations progressed deliberately slowly, as people were under the impression that there would be sufficient time to settle matters and emigrate in an orderly manner. They could not keep pace with the dramatic developments after 1937. When, by the end of 1938, leaving Germany had become the only option for Jews, emigration was more difficult than ever before as most countries had closed their borders to Jewish refugees.

### **Summary: The Complexity of Jewish Emigration before 1938**

The history of Jewish emigration from Germany in the 1930s is overshadowed and blurred by the subsequent events that ultimately led to the Holocaust. Due to the magnitude of the mass murder, all events before and afterwards seem to be related: as the pre- or post-history of the Holocaust. All questions as to how this could have been prevented or how more Jews could have been saved from

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<sup>97</sup> Leo Baeck Institute New York Archives, ME 112, Mally Dienemann, Aufzeichnungen, 1883–1939.

annihilation are understandable and justified. Nonetheless, they can also limit the understanding of major developments and crucial questions of the period itself, in which the coming catastrophe could not be anticipated.

In his article on coping strategies in the context of Jewish history, Dan Michman argues to this effect:

“All things considered, the reactions of the Jews towards persecution but also their survival strategies were disparate and manifold. However, they were always a crucial part of the varying forms of Jewish life as they had developed in earlier days. The reasons why Jews decided to act in one way or another can only be fully understood within this broader context.”<sup>98</sup>

Looking at emigration challenges of German Jews in the 1930s, the entire setting should likewise be detached from familiar temporal as well as spatial limitations. Dwelling on the Holocaust or on Nazi German history between 1933 and 1945 as dominant reference points constricts the perspective on the migration setting of German Jews in the 1930s. It limits our understanding of the period and bears the risk that major developments might be overlooked. To obtain a more comprehensive and precise picture, we need to broaden our view. As proposed in this article, the inclusion of the pre-conditions of migration against the background of the global migration regime and the larger history of Jewish emancipation long before 1933, can enhance our understanding about the German-Jewish 1930s and the migration setting for German Jews.

Taking a much broader approach to German-Jewish migration in the interwar period, Hagit Lavsky, very similarly, concludes in her study on the *Creation of the German-Jewish Diaspora*:

“Until 1938 German Jews calculated their options between going and staying as potential emigrants, who are still able to rationally evaluate the pros and cons, timing and destination for their move, not as refugees who had no choice. Beyond that, they regarded the prospects of time left to get organized

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<sup>98</sup> Michman, *Handeln und Erfahrung*, 270.

for even a transitional existence in Germany as much longer than it turned out to be in reality.”<sup>99</sup>

As this article has demonstrated, the notions of “flight” and “rescue” do not do the complex patterns of experience of the German Jews before 1938 justice. The escalation of the political setting did not necessarily evoke a sense of urgency in the organization of migration. Therefore, this article argues that the notions and categories usually applied to the reconstruction of the migration setting before the crucial year of 1938 have to be reevaluated. In order to fully comprehend the Jewish 1930s, the Jewish emancipation era and its stages of transformation, as well as the migration conditions on a global scale need to be taken into account.

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<sup>99</sup> Lavsky, *The Creation of the German-Jewish Diaspora*.